THE ATTITUDE OF SOCIETY TOWARD THE CHILD AS AN INDEX OF CIVILIZATION[1]

By Felix Adler, Ph.D.,

Chairman of the National Child Labor Committee.

It seems at first almost incredible that the attitude of society toward the child should ever have been otherwise than tender and considerate. It is almost past belief that in a country and civilization as advanced as ours, as proud of its humanity, as hospitable toward all good causes, it should be necessary for the members of the National Child Labor Committee to convene in order to pray the American people to hold their protecting hand over the future citizens of this republic and to pray enlightened men and women to brush aside the web of sophistry with which the practice of exploiting the young child has been defended.

I shall detain you for a little while before we approach the practical question which is before us to ask your attention to a brief historical retrospect.

We find to our amazement that far down in primitive ages, not universally, but very widely, there existed cruel and inhuman practices with respect to children. Even the higher animals are attached to their offspring. Even the lioness defends her cubs; but it seems that the most advanced and most enlightened of nature's offspring, man, he who ascends the greatest heights, is also capable of descending to depths beneath those even of the higher brutes.

The explanation, perhaps, is partly to be found in the extreme destitution and poverty of those early ancestors of ours; partly in the evil influence of crass and fantastic superstition. We find that infanticide was widespread. Seneca boasted that exposure of children prevailed among the Romans. Children were sometimes sold into slavery. Among certain tribes a child was killed if it was born

[1]A résumé and partial report of Dr. Adler's opening address at the Third Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee, held in Music Hall, Cincinnati, Ohio, December 13, 1906.

in stormy weather because this was considered an ill omen. If the child cut its upper front teeth before it cut its lower front teeth it would be killed because this was an ill omen. Deformed children would often be killed, not because they were deformed, but because they were uncanny. Mr. Westermarck in his book, "The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas," gives many examples of this sort. In some places it was customary for the mother to have the privilege of the first life, the first infant; and after that it was at the option of the father whether the child should live or not. In other cases, the mother had the right to the first three lives. After that she was compelled to bury alive her offspring. Cruel, strange, fantastic aberrations!

But they were exceptional. On the whole, we may say that wherever extreme poverty, wherever a certain frenzy or mania did not obsess the human mind, the human parent was kinder to his offspring than the animal. Indeed, the long period of infancy and parental care is regarded by many as the origin of man's higher civilization, as a means of developing the unselfish instincts by which this civilization is graced. Human parents have loved their human children and cared for them. Natural parental love has been disturbed, however, at times all along the line of human development, and is still disturbed to-day by excessive poverty and by frenzies. This modern greed of wealth-getting is also a frenzy. We cannot regard it otherwise than in the nature of a superstition, and of an obsession from which the American people to-day is rudely awakening, seeing itself on the brink of an abyss.

Next to the development and occasional vagaries of parental feeling, there have been at different periods in human history idealistic values attached to children. These have varied in different epochs. What I mean is not the love value, the emotional prizing, but certain ideal values that have made children esteemed and cared for. I shall mention two of these, and then proceed to that which is characteristic of our own age, upon which I desire to dwell.

The first of these idealistic values, aside from natural affection, we find throughout antiquity, and it persists in large measure down to the present day. The child was regarded as that being upon which depended the continuance of the life of the parent in the hereafter. Consider what this meant, that a father or mother facing the future would realize that upon their child—upon their

son, especially, but also upon the daughter, would depend their own continuance. We are apt to think in these modern times that immortality is assured, considering it once gained, always owned. The ancient view was different. They regarded the tenure of the other life as precarious, and they believed that it depended on the child—on the fidelity of the child—to insure the continuance of life in another world. What a strange, fantastic idea it was! The picture is that of the disembodied spirit of the father looking back after death upon this earth and seeing his offspring, who, by their fidelity or infidelity to his memory, decided the spiritual preservation of him who gave them being. Men believed that unless the funereal rites were properly performed the spirit would be compelled to haunt the place where the body lay and would find no rest. Priam prostrating himself at the feet of Achilles, kissing the hands that slew his son; Antigone sacrificing her life for the privilege of sprinkling sand on her brother's body, without which the poor ghost could not rest, are instances in point. Then, too, there was brought to the tomb, at stated times, food and drink, upon which the life of the deceased person depended. The same thought in a higher form is also found in the Jewish world and in the Christian world, where it is believed, popularly, at least, that if not the preservation, yet the well-being of ancestors in the future life depends upon the fidelity with which the sons repeat the mourner's prayer or the priest performs mass for the repose of the deceased. Now this was one idealistic thought value attaching to the child. A parent would look upon his child in the light of a preserver of his spiritual existence when he should have left this earth.

A second idealistic value attaching to the child is more conspicuous in those states of society in which society is divided into hard and fast classes; as, for instance, during the feudal period in Europe. The child, especially the eldest son, is regarded as the preserver, not so much of the life of his parent, as of something impersonal, for which the succession of generations stands—the family, the family name, the family title, the family property, the family rank. The advent of a son is hailed with joy because upon him depends the perpetuation of this impersonal thing of which the different generations are the vehicles.

I shall not attempt to follow my historical retrospect in detail, not wishing to wander too far from the practical question which we

have before us. This background, however, may serve as a means of throwing into greater contrast the third idealistic value which attaches to the child to-day concerning which we are not always aware how modern it is. For upon us has dawned the conception of an evolution, and in the light of that we feel about the child, and speculate about it, and do for it, and dream about it, in a way quite unknown to our forebears. The child to us is no longer chiefly the preserver of something that has been, either of the parental life or of the family name; but it is the promise of something that is to be. The idealistic value we attach to the child is that we see in it the possibility of something finer, something better, something greater on this earth than has yet been. The idealistic view of the past was backward-looking; ours is forward-looking, and especially is this true of us in America. We are a people of hope; we are pre-eminently priests of the future. It is the greatest mistake to suppose that our American democracy, or the American nation, is complete. It is only in the beginnings, in the making. What gives our country greatness is the great men whom we have already produced and whom we honor. But those great men are only the first harbingers of a greatness which no human eye can fairly trace and no human tongue can fully describe, which rises before us a divine vision and a dream. This American democracy exists for a purpose. For what purpose? To create an environment in which the liberty of each shall consist with the liberty of all. Is that our highest and best work—to create a government in which every one shall be well fed, and every one well clothed? Is this our dream? Or does not our American democracy rather mean for us the development of a new type of civilization, of entirely new conceptions of life, of new contributions to art and to science, and to social living?

And now we have reached the point where we can pass on and speak of practical matters. One of the ancient superstitions of which I spoke is that if you wish to build a great edifice, or bridge, or city wall, or anything that shall stand, you must sacrifice a child's life, take a child's blood and paint it on the foundation stone, or bury the child under the foundations. As late as only a few years ago, on the authority of Baring-Gould, there was found in a breach cut in the city walls of Bremen when they were demolished, embedded in the foundation, the skeleton of a child. That was a cruel superstition of the past. That must not be repeated by us. We must

not attempt to build up the civilization of America on the prostrate form of American children. We must not return to those ancient barbarisms. We must not allow this new frenzy, this obsession, this mania of money making at any cost, to lead us into similar frightful aberrations.

Now the argument which has been chiefly emphasized in this child labor movement, is that we must not allow these hundreds of thousands of children to be sacrificed. No one can tell you how many there are—there is a dispute whether there are two hundred thousand or two millions, no one knows exactly, the statistics being quite imperfect, how many hundreds of thousands there are—but there are at least hundreds of thousands American children in this land who are exploited and prematurely exhausted by the burden of toil which is laid upon them.

The usual argument presented is that this premature toil exists and that physically and mentally and morally it lowers the standard of civilization. If we allow this thing to go on, it is said, the next generation, that has been maltreated in this fashion, that has been put to premature labor in cotton mills and in mines and in sweat shops, this next generation will become degenerate, and the standard of American civilization will be lowered. I admit the force of this argument. Like a tree that is made to bear too soon, so the child when made to labor too soon is exhausted. I have heard it said that for the child to go to work is good. Some strong, robust men who have worked on farms, perhaps worked their way up, have an idea that work is good for little children; but work on the farm is one thing, and work in a cotton mill, especially at night, and work in a sweat shop and work in a cigar shop, breathing the dust of tobacco in the little lungs, is quite a different matter. That does not make for health, that does not make for physical development. Brush aside then that sophistry. The child under fourteen that is set to work is physically stunted, is mentally crippled, and gets no chance at the time when his mind is plastic, to be in school. This child labor movement must be accompanied by a movement for compulsory education in every state. Morally the exploited child has no chance, partly because of his associations, partly because of the craving for drink which is often aroused in him by the excessive irritations and nervous exhaustion to which he is subjected, and partly because, as Senator Beveridge has told us on another occasion, the child when

treated unfairly in his youth, becomes anti-social in his instincts, hates the society that has deprived him of sunshine, and is fairly launched on a career of crime. Yes, it is the physical, mental and moral degeneration of hundreds of thousands of future fathers and mothers of this country to which we have got to put an end. If we continue to sanction premature child labor we not only degrade and lower the standard of citizenship, but we prevent that future growth, that development of American civilization, that new type of manhood which we must give to the world in order to contribute to the world's riches. We prevent the evolution of that type; we cut off that dream.

And now in closing let me ask: How shall we remedy this great evil? Shall we leave this matter in the hands of the states, or shall we call in the aid of the nation? Well, I am one of those conservative radicals who, by temperament, by prejudice and by predilection, cling to local self-government and dread the expansion of the federal power. I believe that, in the first place, the expansion of the federal power brings with it a certain enfeeblement of the responsibilities of the individual and of the states, and accustoms us to turn to the national government in matters which we ought to take care of ourselves, and encourages a paternalistic attitude. I believe that local governments are important, because our national representatives are often unacquainted with the conditions that prevail locally and are therefore unable to properly legislate for those conditions and those needs. I believe that local government is educative, inasmuch as it fits us to consider and wisely act upon the larger public questions that concern the nation.

For all these reasons I cling with every fiber of my being to state autonomy, as far as its limits can possibly be extended. And yet the question has got to be faced even by one as reluctant to face it as I am, whether the time has not now come when, despite the emphasis on state responsibility, it is necessary for us to ask for an exercise of national power and authority in order to draw back this nation from this precipice on the brink of which it stands, and cure it of this obsession, this frenzy to which it is subjected. When a part of the nation acts in such a way that the mischief of its action extends beyond its own borders, then the whole nation must intervene. When a part acts in such a way that even if the mischief does not technically and literally extend beyond its borders, yet the moral

turpitude of its action is an offense to the conscience of the whole people, then the whole people must intervene and put an end to that offense and that mischief, as in the case of slavery. And when the state authorities are powerless or insufficiently competent to deal with the evil, when the work of remedy is too slow in the most advanced states, then we are bound to ask what is it that enfeebles and palsies the hands of the state, of the commonwealth, and we are bound to ask whether, perhaps, despite our reluctance, the hand of the great mother of us all must not be called in to strengthen the incompetent and unsatisfying efforts of the several states. What is it then that prevents the abolition of child labor in the different commonwealths; what is it that prevents the satisfactory enforcement of child labor laws, after they have been put on the statute books. It is the power of those commercial and industrial interests that exploit the child which prevents the execution of the law and retards the enforcement of the law. It is those powerful interests—too powerful in many states—against whose unenlightened selfishness the law is directed that make the work of reformation so tardy in the most advanced states and so wholly unsatisfactory in the backward states. And what are the forces we have at our command to deal with those powerful interests in the several states. There is no other but public sentiment. Public sentiment is the only force that can avail to drive back those large, powerful interests. But in the several states public sentiment acts spasmodically, acts tentatively, goes to sleep and wakes up again, gathers force and loses force, and therefore the question arises whether to overcome these interests and evil forces it is not necessary that we should open the sluice gates and let the wave of national sentiment come in and sweep away the evils of unrighteousness in the several states, however strongly they may be entrenched.

There is an old, beautiful saying of a Greek dramatist, "The sea washes away all sins." Perhaps the time has come, and I expect to hear from others whether in their opinion it has come, that we must let in the sea of national patriotism to sweep away our economic sins.